DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 169 168 UD 019 263

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TITLE Some Unintended Consequences of Desegregation: Adult Naivety About Kids' Social Worlds.
PUB DATE Mar 79
NOTE 18p.; Paper prepared for the symposium on Anthropology As American Culture, Annual Meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology (March, 1979); Not available in hard copy due to reproduction quality of the original document

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Anthropology; Bias; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Students; Learning Processes; Multicultural Education; Researchers; *Research Methodology; *School Integration; Socialization; *Social Relations; *Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Magnet Schools

ABSTRACT

Anthropologists studying children in their own society may tend to assume that children and adults speak the same language and have shared knowledge; children's values reflect what they learn at home, their school experience is much like the anthropologist's school experience, and school is primarily a place where knowledge is passed from teacher to student; desegregation is working if there is no reported incidents of violence, multicultural training is provided, and desegregation is begun with young children; and schools can solve social problems. A year long study of children's social relations and communication in a desegregated urban "magnet school" challenges these four assumptions. Data indicate that children's play, body language and trust in adults influence schooling; the contingencies of a new era of youth and black assertiveness must be recognized; and successful desegregation requires more than a public record of nonviolence, multicultural education training, and interracial mixing in the early grades. Anthropologists must understand that children's perceptions and experiences of what it is like to be a student may present a reality that mocks adult ideals and the policies meant to realize them. (Author/WI)

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APR 2 3 1979

3-21-79 rev.

ED169168

Some Unintended Consequences of Desegregation: Adult Naivety About Kids' Social Worlds

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Paper prepared for the symposium on Anthropology As American Culture, Annual Meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology, March, 1979

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Anthropologists studying children in their own society, or just considering their offspring at school, may assume the following: (1) Children and adults speak the same language and have shared knowledge. (2) Children's values reflect what they learn at home, their school experience is much like the anthropologist's own school experience, and school is primarily a place where knowledge is passed from teacher to student. (3) Anthropologists may assume desegregation is working[1] if there are no publicly reported incidents of violence, multicultural training is provided, and desegregation is begun with young children. (4) Anthropologists may assume that schools can solve social problems. A year-long study of children's social relations and communication in a desegregated urban "magnet" school[2] challenges these four assumptions which are the subject of my paper. The problems and immediate and projected consequences of these assumptions for the research, educational, and civil rights enterprises warrant consideration.

The school I studied operates with a court-mandated 50/50 ratio of black and white male and female students in each classroom. The black children come from the neighborhood in which the school is located; the white children are from families who volunteer to have them bussed because of a superior "Pacesetter" educational program and a belief in desegregation or a tolerance for it.

Open-ended interviews were conducted with a random sample of 120 students stratified by sex, race, and grades 2, 4, and 6, chosen to reflect different levels of cognitive and social development. Participant observations, films, and videotapes validate the children's perceptions of what it is like to be a student at this Pacesetter school. Other research indicates that the problems found in this comparatively ideal institution are magnified manyfold at other schools in less ideal circumstances.

Let us turn to the first assumption. (1) As data gathering and data processing instruments, anthropologists may assume that if they study a public

school in their own society they generally share the participants' language and thus have access to what is going on. However, there are important considerations that may be overlooked: the greater primacy of play and nonverbal modes of social interaction among children and the researcher's nonpunitive role.

(1a) What is overlooked as trivial play or "horsing around" in the classroom or informal areas of the school covers a great deal of children's social life oridinarily hidden from adult eyes. Children receive experiential lessons from each other--the "meddlin'" curricula may subvert formal education. Meddlin' refers to verbal and nonverbal aggression.

(1b) Because researchers usually overspecialize in the vocal and auditory channels of communication, they lose access to what occurs nonverbally among children whose visual, tactile, kinesthetic, olfactory, and proxemic senses are especially active. Whereas adults tend to regard the body as a platform for the head, children tend to regard the body as more of an instrument of action, including aggression. People who speak the same verbal language often make the unwarranted assumption that they share other communication systems as well. Illustrative are the faulty communication attempts to develop friendships. Middle class children perceive black working class children's fighting initiative as a message that friendship is precluded. White children take a black child's invasion of personal space to brush their hair which is meant to say "Hi" or "I'm curious," as an aggressive act.

(1c) Anthropologists debate the insider/outsider advantages and disadvantages of access to data collection and analysis of individual and group behavior. Although Williams and Morland (1976) found no differences between responses given to black and white interviewers, there is an assumption that a researcher should be of the same color, culture, group, or status in order to gain maximum understanding. In addition to the insider-outsider considerations, yet another factor of importance in my field research was my nonpunitive role.

I was somewhat of an outsider-insider participant-observer as a helping parent of two boys attending the school and an author writing a story about Pacesetter. However, children learned what was primary to them--I was a nonpunishing person. Children misbehaved before my eyes and spoke about their misbehavior in ways they did not before school authorities.

To summarize my discussion of the first assumption, my study disclosed that if a researcher studies children in his or her own society, a shared verbal language is insufficient to understand what is occurring. Being aware of the serious business of children's play, the saliency of body language, and the need to prove oneself as nonpunitive are also necessary.

(2) Let us turn to the second assumption that children reflect home values, their school experiences are similar to the researcher's own, and teachers are the dispensers of knowledge at school. When I asked parents, school personnel, or researchers a question, they often replied, "I remember when I was in __ grade." Obviously, there is some continuity across generations. However, not only do children rely heavily on multichanneled communication which adults forget, but children's experiences today are enmeshed in a different milieu of increased lack of discipline in school and society. Furthermore, there is an important interface of childhood experience--peer interactions in a new era of black assertiveness without adult historical perspective create generational differences. Peer social survival often takes precedence over academic task performance in the dual agenda of schooling. This is especially the case in a setting with large numbers of black working class children who are sensitive to race relations. At Pacesetter, working class children who are generally two grade levels behind national average in academic skills confront middle class children who are generally two grade levels above average. Problems occur through the interplay among school demands, black working class peer pressure against trying hard to succeed academically (they say "that's for fags"), and the nonacademically oriented individual's creation and validation of self identity and dignity through meddlin' and gaining peer attention in an alternative reward system.

The resulting
fear, anxiety, and psychosomatic illness among middle and working class children perpetuate negative images and impede processes of equal educational opportunity that lead to adult socioeconomic success in activities within the law in a white dominated society.

Reflecting home values, many children who had had black friends in their former schools began speaking negatively about "black" children when they attended the court-ordered desegregated school in which race and class intersect. Such statements as "They get me in trouble," "I don't like Pacesetter," "I'm sick, I can't go to school," "It was so noisy in class I got a headache and spent two hours in the nurse's office today" were common as were reports of black children's misdeeds. Many parents tend to dismiss such comments. Usually the white adults' interactions with blacks have been with middle class individuals who share their values and behavior or with maids who followed instructions. Many black parents who grew up in an era of self-effacing shuffling before whites had attended strict schools. Now some black adults realize their anti-white hostility through their children, telling them not to let any white people push them around. Forced to live out parents' and society's idealist visions and assumptions of experiential continuity across generations, children in their own worlds of new experiences cannot help but lose trust in naive adult pronouncements.

(3) Turning to the third commonly held proposition, desegregation is assumed to be working if there are no media reports of violence, schools allocate special resources to assist the process of desegregation and promote multiculturalism, and, further, that desegregation is begun with young children.

(3a) Although children's social relations often appear harmonious, children have rarely been asked what it is like to be a student in a desegregated school where race and class intersect. Rarely have children been observed to see to what extent their reports correlate with what actually occurs. Pacesetter children perceive meddlin' as salient and unpleasant. This salience is clear from children's

comments about their likes and dislikes concerning the school, what they consider appropriate behavior in different settings, fears of other children, and the reasons for these fears. Regardless of sex, race, and grade level, children's comments suggest that blacks fight more and value it more than whites.[3] Of course there are bullies and fights everywhere. But as one black child put it, "Blacks do it badder." Another said that the black toughs get what they want with their muscles, so they don't have to study. Whites and some blacks react aversively to meddlin' or misinterpret its ramifications, including the initiation of friendship. In response to the question, "What causes fights?" a number of children gave perceptive answers that we can categorize as racism and the need to earn respect, socialization to violence, inadequate academic work and the need to save face, responding to a self-fulfilling prophecy that blacks are more physical, poor impulse control of anger, sexual competition, desire to test one's strength and establish position in a peer hierarchy, peer pressure, and desire for attention. A few children said the classroom permits more aggression than the playground. In the classroom there is only one teacher to watch; on the playground there are several. Meddlin' also occurs in the hallways and especially in the restrooms. Blacks and whites are targets of aggression. However, as is the case among adults, most actual fights as opposed to harassment are intra-racial. Boys fight more, although girls do fight, and sometimes a girl beats up a boy. A target may be an aggressor's equal. More often children who are unequal in some way--newcomers, physically handicapped, differently dressed, scholastic achievers who are not athletes, and children who appear to "put on airs" or brag are vulunerable to meddlin'.

Children respond to aggression with what Schofield (in press) called "strong-suit" tactics. Middle class children at Pacesetter who come from families with a median income of $20,000 tend to respond to meddlin' with pasive "safe" strategies of taking it; complying with demands; or disengaging oneself with the mediation of a teacher, protection

of a "patron," or one's ability to divert an aggressor with humor, negotiation, or withdrawal. Physically weaker children often have protectors whom they tell if someone meddles them, and the stronger child takes up for the weaker. (We usually do not think of patron-client relationships in elementary school.) A few white and more black children who come from homes with a median income of $9,000 respond to meddlin' in a reciprocal manner, tit for tat.

(3b) Desegregation is assumed to be served if a school staff has training in multicultural education and the school celebrates cultural pluralism. However, multicultural training programs at Pacesetter as elsewhere have neglected children's social worlds. Consider the classroom management technique of punishing an entire class for the misbehavior of a few so that peer pressure will bring these few into line. It usually works among a homogeneous middle class group. The technique does not work when black working class children's rules require a child who tells a tough youngster what to do to fight the tough to make him or her do it. In preparation for a litigative society, the school requires verbal negotiation of conflict; training programs often overlook the fact that survival in some children's worlds requires physically striking out first.

Multicultural education is related to the anthropological view that life is relativistic and celebrates bilingualism and ethnic identity. This perspective often does not consider that the unmodified public existence of an autonomous minority culture, especially if manifestations such as meddlin' violate notions of appropriateness in dominant American culture, may serve as a barrier for the minority to opportunities controlled by the majority. The issue of assimilation versus cultural pluralism, perhaps falsely drawn, centers on communication styles, human relations, incentive motivation, and teaching and curriculum. Cultural pluralists sometimes view the school in terms of a clash of black versus Anglo culture. They confound some of the traits required for a western industrial, technological, capitalist system and those which are adequate for rural, preindustrial, or

low level technological development, or an unemployment-welfare orientation. Certain economic systems require specific values and skills wherever they operate and whatever the color of their participants. Thus the need may be to provide individuals with choice: teaching the skills that allow a person access to socioeconomic mobility and code-switching (being able to operate in one or another at will). Therefore, desegregation's provision of resource equalization should include, in addition to material physical plant, teaching and enrichment, and recognition and respect for the achievements and selected cultural patterns of different groups, access to mainstream communicative modes, codes, and processes--explicit knowledge of what the middle class knows implicitly.

Schools must also provide arenas for individuals to achieve self dignity in academic subjects. Schools have built-in pressures of comparison, embarrassment, anxiety, and self-doubt that lead some youngsters to behave in ways which are not conducive to succeeding academically and to developing harmonious interracial relationships or friendships. By disrupting the classroom routines and academic performances, children communicate through humor or aggression that they do not recognize the evaluative processes of the school. They define both the situation and their own performance in it as matters to be taken lightly and inappropriate for judging their serious worth or capabilities.

Civil rights advocates in multicultural education often claim that tracking, streaming, or ability grouping within a school is a deliberate subterfuge for segregation in desegregation, a manoeuvre to maintain the status quo. Yet they overlook the rights of individuals to human dignity. Consider this case of sixth grade black male non-readers. In a small group of four, one member would not participate. Ridiculed by the other three more advanced nonreaders, the youngster clammed up. The perceptive special education teacher worked on a one-to-one basis with the boy. He learned to read. In the system of positive reinforcement, he asked to have more individualized reading instruction as his reward. Ability grouping for specific subjects and separation from peer pressure may be essential so that a child has equal opportunity. This must be coupled with

continual evaluation and opportunity for moving children to appropriate groups so that a child does not become locked in.

(3c) Beginning desegregation in the early school grades is assumed to promote positive race relations. However, social contact and social distance theories (Pettigrew 1971) are confused. Even preschoolers notice the color and physiognomy of individuals and may generalize an experience with one person of a group to all of its members.

Young children may not be able to cope with diverse cultural styles. In the first evaluation of Pacesetter conducted by Estes and Skipper (1976), white students in grades one to three declined in self concept concerning their intellectual status, popularity, and happiness. For blacks, there was an increase from pre-test to post-test on popularity and total self concept scores.

The decline of white self concept may lie in the fact that students in this age group are relatively rigid about what is correct behavior. They lack tolerance for alternative norms and empathy. Older children acquire these qualities and can rationalize deviations from their own norms. The white children at Pacesetter encounter black children who have a wider normative range of acceptable behavior among peers. The exposure to behaviors they think are wrong may challenge the white children's self-concepts. The fact that some second-graders had more negative attitudes toward blacks than their older siblings at Pacesetter suggests a developmental pattern.

The increase of black self concept scores concerning popularity and happiness may be due to the fact that the black children and their families had anticipated interracial problems which did not occur. Historically, blacks often experienced harassment by whites when Pacesetter was created as a desegregated school, black children feared going into a situation where they thought they might be disliked and embarrassed. Black self-concept concerning intellectual status did not increase, perhaps because of the black/white comparisons.

Interracial friendship involves more than social contact at any age. Previously established friendships on the bases of similar interests and neighborhood networks often preclude openness to voluntarily making friends. Without social intervention that brings children together with similar interests in structured small cooperatives team tasks where each person has equal status, segregation in desegregation is likely to persist.

Underestimating the complexity and subtlety of social knowledge a child needs to interact successfully among multicultural peers, some adults say "kids pick up" the "common sense" principles of social performance. Some do so in the same way others learn to read without formal instruction. However, self starters need work on the subtleties of language arts and social relations, respectively. Children who are picked on, for example, may need instruction in patron-client relationships in order to get along.

In sum, the third assumption that desegregation is working if the media reports no violence, multicultural training occurs, and desegregation is begun with young children overlooks children's perceptions of meddlin', the variety of children's rules for social behavior, working class-neighborhood network peer pressure, and the developmental ability to tolerate norms that differ from one's owns.

(4) Let us turn to the fourth assumption. Although we recognize that the family, church, and other institutions no longer fulfill their traditional roles, Americans still assume the school will be a panacea for social problems. By mandating desegregation plans without providing direction for considering unintended consequences in the development of a unique social experiment designed to meet constitutional law, the courts have unwittingly set in motion forces that are counterproductive of providing equal educational opportunity. One of the key unintended consequences is that children and teachers are thrust into abusive physical or psychological environments which are the result of historical patterns, the influences of

children upon each other, and adult naivety. The injured dignity of those weak of mind or muscle, and those with soiled pants or headaches, speak to unintended consequences and unfulfilled expectations. So far the evidence of desegregation leading to black academic achievement and improved social relations is equivocal.

Because there is a taboo, unspoken behavioral norms preventing reference to differences that involve color, that exists in civil rights circles, critical problems are ignored. Some parents say that racial difficulties exist in real life beyond the school, so children in desegregated schools are learning about reality. The unintended consequence is the absence of problem-solving and the perpetuation of the status quo. Discussing "racial" problems often leads to emotional charges of subverting civil rights. However, more subversive and certainly more harmful is ignoring experiential realities as children perceive them and observers document.

A critical unintended consequence of ignoring desegregation problems appears to be a drift toward a more socioeconomically stratified society as those who can afford it send their children to private schools rather than have them attend desegregated schools. This exodus could erode the local tax base and state legislative allocations for public education. Historically, whites put their children in private schools to avoid desegregation. Now there are numerous blacks taking their children out of public schools (Hechinger 1979). An elite private school population reflects a clear pool of resources for professional and managerial positions, whereas the public schools provide a lower level pool. The gap between the two groups could widen, for the opportunities for the working class to learn the hidden curriculum of the middle class and talented individuals to be trained for high socioeconomic positions would decrease.

Sociologist James S. Coleman, whose massive study in the mid-1960s was used to support school desegregation, now says it is a "mistaken belief that

black students learn better in desegregated classrooms. Desegregation has turned out to be much more complicated than any of us ever realized" (quoted in Feinberg 1978). Four pairs of contrastive threads weave through the story of my field work. Black and white, working class and middle class, neighborhood friendship networks and strangers, and children and adults. Evaluation--the process of identifying problems and exploring their ramifications--is critical to solving social problems.

Since schools are part of the local, state, and national contexts, they are limited in what they can do. For example, the positive motivation of working class students toward academic achievement and school norms is affected by their potential employment opportunities; nonschool structures significantly impact upon the school.[5] However, within their arena of authority, schools confront a chief source of difficulty in the adult failure to recognize the distinctness of the child's social world and their unwitting roles in it. Schools may unintentionall act in ways that simulate and legitimize negative behaviors rather than intervene to promote the goals they desire.

In sum, the data from my study challenge assumptions that may guide the the research and educational enterprises. First, besides sharing a verbal language with children, those trying to understand schooling must consider seriously children's play, body language, and test of adult trustworthiness. Second, in addition to assuming generational continuity, it is necessary to recognize the contingencies of a new era of youth and black assertiveness in which children are enmeshed. Third, successful desegregation requires more than a public record of nonviolence, multicultural education training as it has been provided, and interracial mixing in the early grades. Awareness of children's perceptions and experiences can lead to the development of mediating intervention strategies to

deal with meddlin' and peer pressure against a black working class member's serious academic efforts. Fourth, schools can only solve society's problems when other powerful institutions work in tandem toward equity goals. Anthropologists are committed to taking the native's view in evaluating social policy for the natives. In schools, children's perceptions and experiences about what it is like to be a student may present a reality that mocks adult ideals and the policies meant to realize them.

Footnotes

1. The criteria for successful desegregation vary. Maintaining a numerical racial balance may satisfy the courts. A boost in academic achievement may satisfy the educational agencies. Quality, orderly education may be the criteria of success for local communities.

2. Reports of this study appear in Hanna 1979a, 1979b. The former has a chapter on recommendations in light of research findings.

3. No white boy or girl expressed a positive attitude toward fighting. Two boys thought it was okay to fight if someone else started it. One black girl was positive, four thought it okay in self defense. Five black boys volunteered a positive judgement; seven a qualified positive attitude. When I asked about misbehavior, children often volunteered names. Similarly, when I asked children if they were afraid of anyone at school, they often volunteered names. There seemed to be a concensus about those who caused problems.

4. LeCompte (1978) among others speaks of the special function of schooling which prepares youngsters for the work world through a hidden curriculum stressing authority, time, work, and order. I use the term more broadly to include styles of social relations.

5. See Ogbu 1974. Herbers (1979) reports that the unemployment picture for minority youths, particularly blacks, is about what it was for the entire nation in the depths of the Great Depression. Flint (1979) reports the jobless rate for nonwhite youths at 35.3 percent. Dallas, at the time of my study, was better off than many other cities, especially in the northeast. Below is a 1976 breakdown (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics):

	Dallas-Ft. Worth	New York City
overall unemployment	4.6 percent	10.4
black & other minority	7.1	12.6
white teen	15.2	22.1
black and other teen	27.5	47.0

In 1975 about seven percent of the Pacesetter black children's fathers were unemployed. The relationships between academic performance, school policy, and employment is suggested by the Wingate School experience. Hentoff (1979) reported that a principal transformed a chaotic high school by individualizing programs, stressing reading in all subjects, discouraging teachers from treating students as losers, providing realistic vocational training, and providing after school and summer jobs through a nearly one million dollar federally funded Cooperative Education Program.

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